

Local businesses hailed for hanging tough

Governor promises to keep plugging away at workers comp reform

By DAVE SMITH
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Gov. Linda Lingle told business leaders Wednesday that they played a prominent role in the recent rebound in the Big Island economy.

Speaking before a joint luncheon meeting of four East Hawaii Rotary clubs at the Hawaii Naniloa Resort, Lingle echoed some of the assessments given last week by an economist at a Hilo business forum.

All indicators such as growth in the construction and tourism industries demonstrate the increasing strength of the economy in Hawaii and the Big Island in particular, she said.

Lingle said persistence on the part of businesses to survive in the lean times was a big part of that turnaround.

"You toughed it out in the 1990s," she said. "You didn't give up and I'm glad you didn't."

Lingle said the state was recently successful in placing an office in China's capitol city. She said Hawaii is only the second state -- after Nevada -- to obtain permission to open an office in Beijing.

With the 2008 Olympics "right around the corner," the office will provide a chance for Hawaii to showcase its strengths, which she said included experts in the hospitality and planning fields.

"This is going to open up, I think, a whole new world to us," she said.

The first-term Republican governor also spoke of her administration's efforts to reform the state's worker compensation laws, a subject near and dear to her audience. Lingle said the lack of progress in that area was her biggest disappointment in the last legislative session.

On the upside, Lingle said, the Legislature reduced regulatory fees paid by businesses.

In other legislative matters, Lingle said she would continue to push for reform of public education, which for her administration means decentralization.

She described the education package approved earlier this year by the Democratic-controlled Legislature as "fake reform," and said she will continue to push for additional changes.

Lingle told the business leaders to watch early next year for reform efforts in another arena, the state's Medicaid system. She said with rising costs for prescription drugs and other medical care, "we're going to run out of money."

The changes she will seek will focus more on prevention, she said.



Gov. Linda Lingle speaks before a joint Rotary Club meeting Wednesday at the Hawaii Naniloa Resort in Hilo. WILLIAM ING/Tribune-Herald

As for the Legislature in general, Lingle said there needs to be emphasis on what she called two new "business models" lawmakers should follow.

She said the first is to encourage lawmakers to take quicker action on legislative matters. The second is to get away from the current practice where lobbyists are hired to influence legislators.

"Let's elect people who agree with us before they get there (to the Legislature)," she said.

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